

1. Basic Ethical Principles

by 3andB Staff Writer | March 15, 2025

CNA Standard ME 1.1: Ethical Foundations

The Four Pillars of Medical Ethics: Your Guide to Ethical Healthcare

Medical ethics forms the foundation of modern healthcare, guiding healthcare workers in making decisions that protect and benefit their patients. As a healthcare professional, understanding these principles helps you provide the best possible care while respecting patient rights and dignity.

Understanding Medical Ethics

Medical ethics consists of four fundamental principles that work together to create a framework for ethical healthcare delivery. These principles - autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice - help healthcare workers navigate complex situations and make decisions that uphold professional standards while respecting patient rights.

The Four Core Principles

Autonomy: Respecting Patient Choices

Autonomy means respecting patients' right to make their own healthcare decisions. You must provide clear information about treatment options and obtain informed consent before procedures. This includes respecting a patient's right to refuse treatment, even if you disagree with their choice. For example, a patient may decline a recommended surgery after understanding the risks and benefits.

Beneficence: Promoting Patient Wellbeing

Beneficence requires you to act in ways that benefit your patients. This means choosing treatments and interventions that promote healing and improve quality of life. When changing bed linens, repositioning patients regularly, or ensuring proper nutrition,

you're practicing beneficence by preventing complications and promoting comfort.

Non-maleficence: Avoiding Harm

Non-maleficence translates to "do no harm." This principle requires you to avoid actions that could harm patients. Following proper infection control procedures, double-checking medications, and using proper lifting techniques are all examples of non-maleficence in practice. Sometimes, treatments may have side effects, but the potential benefits should outweigh any risks.

Justice: Ensuring Fair Treatment

Justice in healthcare means treating all patients fairly and ensuring equal access to care. This includes distributing healthcare resources fairly and providing the same quality of care regardless of a patient's background, beliefs, or ability to pay. For example, patients should receive equal attention and care regardless of their insurance status or social background.



Healthcare facilities use ethics committees to help resolve complex situations where different ethical principles seem to conflict.

Practical Applications

In your daily work, these principles guide many decisions:

- Explaining procedures and obtaining consent (autonomy)
- Providing comfort measures and preventive care (beneficence)
- Following safety protocols and infection control (non-maleficence)
- Treating all patients with equal respect and care (justice)

Real-world scenarios help illustrate these principles in action. When caring for an elderly patient with dementia, you maintain their dignity by explaining procedures even if their understanding is limited. During busy shifts, you ensure fair distribution of your time among all patients. When helping patients with mobility, you use proper equipment and techniques to prevent injury while promoting independence. These everyday decisions demonstrate how ethical principles shape quality healthcare delivery.

Common Challenges

Healthcare workers often face situations where these principles seem to conflict. For example, a patient's wish to refuse treatment (autonomy) might conflict with your duty to help them (beneficence). In such cases, careful consideration of all factors and consultation with supervisors helps determine the best course of action.

Best Practices for Ethical Care

To maintain ethical practice:

- Communicate clearly with patients about their care
- Document all decisions and consent properly

- Maintain patient confidentiality
- Report any ethical concerns to supervisors
- Stay updated on ethical guidelines and regulations
- Participate in ethics training and discussions

Future Developments

Healthcare ethics continues to evolve with new technologies and treatments. Emerging areas include:

- Genetic testing and therapy ethics
- Artificial intelligence in healthcare decisions
- End-of-life care options
- Telemedicine privacy and access
- Resource allocation during health crises

Medical ethics provides the framework for delivering care that respects patients while promoting their wellbeing. By understanding and applying these principles, you ensure that your care meets professional standards and protects patient rights.

The four fundamental principles of medical ethics create a comprehensive framework for delivering respectful, beneficial, and fair healthcare to all patients.



Medical ethics extends beyond just doctor-patient relationships to include all healthcare workers, from nurses to technicians.

1. Basic Ethical Principles

GUIDED NOTES

Key Terms

1. Autonomy: _____
2. Beneficence: _____
3. Non-maleficence: _____
4. Justice: _____
5. Ethics: _____

Main Concept Overview

Fill in the blanks using the word bank below to complete key statements about medical ethics:

Word Bank: wellbeing, consent, background, dignity, harm

1. Healthcare workers must obtain informed _____ before performing procedures.
2. Promoting patient _____ is a key aspect of beneficence.
3. The principle “do no _____” refers to non-maleficence.
4. Patients should receive equal care regardless of their _____.
5. Medical ethics helps protect patient _____ while providing quality care.

Matching Section

Match each term with its correct description by writing the letter in the blank:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Autonomy | A. Treating all patients fairly and ensuring equal access |
| _____ 2. Justice | B. Acting to benefit patients and promote healing |
| _____ 3. Beneficence | C. Respecting patients' right to make their own decisions |
| _____ 4. Documentation | D. Following safety protocols to prevent patient harm |
| _____ 5. Non-maleficence | E. Recording all decisions and patient consent properly |

True/False Questions

Mark each statement as True (T) or False (F):

- _____ 1. Patients have the right to refuse treatment even if healthcare workers disagree.
- _____ 2. Medical ethics principles only apply to major medical procedures.
- _____ 3. Healthcare workers should provide equal care regardless of insurance status.
- _____ 4. Patient confidentiality is part of ethical healthcare practice.
- _____ 5. Ethical principles never conflict with each other in practice.

Complete the Table

Fill in the examples for each ethical principle:

Ethical Principle	Practical Application Example
Autonomy	
Beneficence	
Non-maleficence	
Justice	

Critical Thinking Questions

1. A patient refuses a recommended treatment that you know would greatly improve their condition. How would you apply the principles of medical ethics in this situation?

2. How might emerging technologies in healthcare create new ethical challenges for healthcare workers? Consider the four principles of medical ethics in your response.

1. Basic Ethical Principles - Hypotheticals

Scenario 1: Emergency Department Priority

During a busy shift in the emergency department, two patients arrive simultaneously. Patient A is a prominent local business owner with minor injuries. Patient B is an uninsured individual with moderate chest pain. Resources are limited, and you can only attend to one patient immediately.

Questions:

- a) Which medical ethics principle most directly applies to this situation?
- b) How would you prioritize care in this scenario while upholding ethical principles?
- c) What documentation would be essential in this situation?

Scenario 2: Technology and Privacy

You're implementing a new telehealth system at your clinic. The system allows faster patient consultations but stores patient data in a cloud server. Several elderly patients express confusion about using the technology, while others worry about their privacy.

Questions:

- a) How do you balance beneficence (improved access to care) with patient autonomy?
- b) What ethical considerations should guide the implementation of this new system?
- c) How would you ensure justice in providing care through this new platform?

1. Basic Ethical Principles - Hypotheticals

Scenario 3: Cultural Considerations

A teenage patient requires a routine procedure, but their family's cultural beliefs conflict with standard treatment protocols. The family suggests alternative treatments that aren't evidence-based but are important to their cultural practices.

Questions:

- a) How do you balance respect for cultural autonomy with the principle of beneficence?
- b) What steps would you take to address this situation ethically?
- c) How might you modify your approach while maintaining professional standards?

Scenario 4: Resource Allocation

Your healthcare facility receives a limited supply of new specialized equipment. Multiple patients could benefit from this equipment, but you must establish usage criteria. Some patients have better recovery prospects, while others have been waiting longer.

Questions:

- a) Which ethical principles come into conflict in this scenario?
- b) How would you develop fair criteria for equipment allocation?
- c) What factors should be considered to ensure ethical distribution of resources?

1. Basic Ethical Principles - Reflection Questions

#1

How might your understanding of medical ethics influence your daily interactions with patients in your future healthcare career?

Think about routine tasks like helping patients with personal care or sharing medical information. Consider how each of the four ethical principles could guide your actions and decisions in these everyday situations.

#2

How would you apply the principle of justice in a healthcare setting where resources are limited?

Consider your local community and its healthcare needs. Think about how you would ensure fair treatment while managing practical constraints. What challenges might you face in providing equitable care?

#3

How do you think emerging technologies in healthcare might create new ethical challenges?

Consider developments like telemedicine, AI diagnostics, and genetic testing. Think about how these advances might affect patient privacy, access to care, and the doctor-patient relationship.

TERM	DEFINITION
Autonomy	
Beneficence	
Confidentiality	
Consent	
Ethics	
Infection Control	
Justice	
Non-maleficence	
Prevention	
Protocol	

1: WORD SEARCH

Medical Ethics

W G O E O Y I U Z N G Y V L A M M Z S E N D E I
V M X W L P J O Y W O V C Y M S D Y C D G X T W
C O Z O W V L H V E I N I Q B A X P Q Z C Z H K
W S P R N Z C Z E J N T M A W A O S B Z P Q I D
K S N X W K N P F V F K V A R S D F Z J N X C Q
D A J A Y Z Z R B L E Z P Y L C O N S E N T S Q
P G K L S J N O N B C E R Y V E I P H K P G V I
G B V Y K U K T I T T O E T H R F P Y X S T A W
T O Y V O S U O C E I Z V J B T T I B C W F Y W
U Y L S Q T N C N L O F E C O F D G C D C N E M
Y H X N V I H O L D N O N C L C O J B E J U R E
R D Z N Q C M L B C C I T Y Y K E P T G N V D W
U S N U C E A J J M O G I C H I P U E N T C F H
A J J F C W N M Z X N S O P Y N Z H Y J Z Z E S
Q U L M W C O Z G K T N N V H Z X A P G U R Z T
W F T V G O K S D N R U A N W N H G S L Q I C D
R Z B O X X W E K V O F U G R O O P V G P P O Y
Z O V G N A N T D I L D P L U W Y J S N A T C O
C S M U L O C O N F I D E N T I A L I T Y Q G C
U K H S Y L M R R X M A O V T E M A P A X U Z O
X S Z Z R Q E Y Y B U W V Q D O Z N O T P D I J
Y H Q O C R L U N Q T C S F B S U I V M V N R Q
K A X Z Y K Q Z S N C E G H I S J V P K O V M C
F L B E N E F I C E N C E Q D C U H T N K M K X

Infection Control

Protocol

Prevention

Non-maleficence

Justice

Ethics

Consent

Confidentiality

Beneficence

Autonomy

Medical Ethics

Across

3. The right of patients to make their own healthcare decisions and have control over their treatment choices

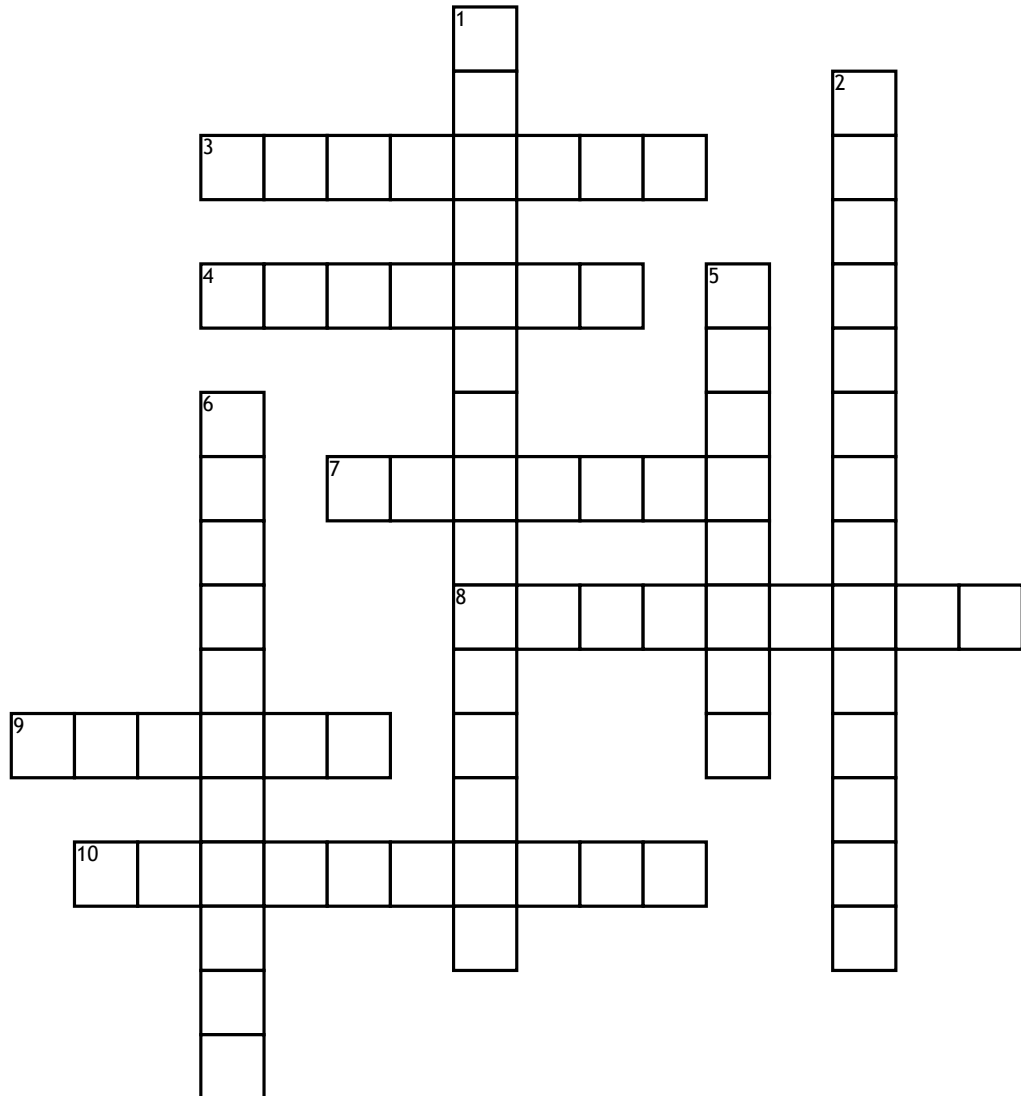
4. The principle of treating all patients fairly and ensuring equal access to healthcare regardless of background

7. Permission given by a patient for treatment after receiving clear information about procedures, risks, and benefits

8. Procedures and practices that prevent the spread of harmful organisms and protect patient safety, _____

Control

9. The principles that guide healthcare workers in making decisions that protect and benefit their patients



10. Actions taken to stop health problems before they occur or prevent existing conditions from getting worse

Down

1. The professional obligation to protect and keep private all patient information and medical records

2. The principle of "do no harm," requiring healthcare workers to avoid actions that could harm patients

5. Standard procedures and guidelines that healthcare workers follow to ensure safe and effective patient care

6. The principle of acting in ways that promote patient wellbeing and improve their health outcomes